# TO BECOME THE WHOLE WORLD'S SEASONING

February 8, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Isaiah 58:6-9a
Matthew 5:13-16

**"You are the salt of the earth."** --Matthew 5:13a (RSV)

One of the great puzzles in the human story is how the movement begun by Jesus of Nazareth in the year 30 A.D. became the official religion of most of the known world in less than three centuries. There is a new book by a British Jesuit, Michael Walsh, which sets out to solve the puzzle. The title of the book is The Triumph of the Meek: Why Early Christianity Succeeded. Here is the way the author describes the issue:

> "On the face of it, Christianity had little to commend it. It sprang from an insignificant corner of the empire, far distant from the capital city. Its roots lay in the despised Judaism, and its founder had been executed by that most demeaning of deaths, crucifixion. It had, at least at first, attracted the least influential members of society, and it had been attacked in polemical tracts and held up to ridicule by some of the empires' best writers. Christianity presents the historian with something of a paradox..."(p. 11)

The puzzle is more than academic significance. We live in a time when the future of the church seems to be in doubt, and in a culture which seems increasingly indifferent. How did they do it? What can we learn from them?

Why did early Christianity succeed? Well, a lot of them didn't. A lot of them died being faithful, some very dramatically, some quietly, invisibly. There are, of course, many theories to explain Christianity's unlikely success - about the time being ripe for a world religion to emerge, and the empire needing a spiritual adhesive to hold itself together. But the historians who look at the movement itself consistently hone in on the quality of life, corporately and individually, lived by the early Christians in public. People saw and then listened and then, because they had seen something special, believed its truth. It wasn't the theology, nor was it great preaching. Someone has noted that "the Christianity that conquered the Roman Empire was not an affair of brilliant preachers addressing packed congregations. We have nothing much in the way of brilliant preachers for the first 300 years of the church's life. It was done by servants, workers, shopkeepers, teaching Christ through their work." (T. W. Manson, in Hans Reudi-Weber, Salty Christians)

The scholars know that the most effective missionary work has, from the very beginning, been ordinary people trying to live like Christians in a pagan world. Michael Walsh says it was a new and admirable morality. The early Christians exhibited a new way of living.

Echoes of that are found on back in history, in the prophetic tradition of Judaism. The first lesson this morning defined a unique style of being faithful to God -

-to loose the bonds of wickedness
-to share bread with the hungry
-to bring homeless poor into your house
-to cover the naked.

"Then," the prophet suggested, "your light shall break like the dawn - your healing shall spring up speedily - your righteousness shall go before you." (Isaiah 58:6-9)

You know, the world knows, and so do I, that the only religion worth anything at all, is rooted in and expressed in and celebrated in human life. We know that authentic religion is connected, at a profound level, with life and that it somehow enhances life.

What is it about Christianity that has compelled your faith in the past? If your pilgrimage through life has led you to the church - not as a believer, but as a seeker, a questioner, inquirer, what is it about this enterprise that continues to haunt you? If your quest has been successful: if you have accomplished what you have set out to accomplish: if you have accumulated a fair measure of this world's goods, what is there about this business that keeps nagging, submitting a vocal minority reports in the back of your mind? My hunch is that you and I are intrigued by - captivated by - the notion that in Jesus Christ - there is something to be learned and experienced about real human life. There is something very interesting here: a promise of human life made more vivid, more intense, more full of flavor, zest, liveliness.

People who exhibit that quality of life have a way, not only of compelling my faith, but of changing the world around them; seasoning the life around them with God's gracious love. Sometimes to live that way is costly: sometimes shortened by its own saltiness: like those four military chaplains in World War II who gave away their life jackets that four others might live and who died together. Or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, gentle, pacifist, scholar, drawn into a plot to assassinate Hitler. Or Martin Luther King, whose academic credentials, we are inclined to forget, were real and who easily could have been a distinguished professor in a major university - but whose sense of the Gospel led him to live radically and to confront the established injustices of our culture. Or Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak, electing to live, on a very dangerous edge in South Africa, or Terry Waite. . .

The Christianity which I have found compelling comes through lives of radical, unambiguous involvement in the world. Sometimes it ends in martyrdom. But not always. Sometimes it takes the form of a consistent,

uncompromising love for the world, a deep embracing and affirming of life - which has been made holy by Jesus Christ.

Some of us cannot point to one magnificent conversion experience, but instead have a wonderful series of experiences - a series which is still in process, by the way. Let me tell you about one of mine. Somewhere from my early exposure to Christianity and the church I had gotten the idea that Christians were not comfortable with the rigors of academic life; were threatened it seemed to me, by open scientific inquiry; nor did it seem that Christians cared much about the common joys of life - like baseball, and all in all took a dim view of what might be called delicately the "pleasures of the flesh." And so it was a conversion experience to discover that for some people the opposite was the truth, that Christianity actually enhanced and enlarged human life instead of reducing and diminishing its dimensions. The person who bore witness to that was a college professor - who taught religion in a class everyone had to take, but then took the trouble to visit in the dormitory and talk about the religious views in life and who conveyed to us that there was something essentially good about the philosophic insights of Soren Kierkegaard, a well turned double play, and a fine cigar. It had never occurred to me that God's love in Jesus Christ was addressed to that breadth of human life. I thought it only had to do with prayer meetings.

Another teacher and another small conversion happened when I met Joseph Sittler, University of Chicago, now professor emeritus, who taught theology but with equal intensity loved the language, poetry and literature and music and played the French horn. Sittler caught me because I had concluded that in order to be religious, one had to be glum, boring. But the Gospel of Christ seemed to make him more human, more salty, more an unabashed lover of life...One of my favorite Sittler essays, not because of its theological insights - but because of its spirit, is entitled "Polish Sausage, St. Augustine and The Moral Life." In it he recalls the vending truck that parked each noon outside the Administration Building at the University. The specialty was sausage which he describes as "Rich, juicy, odorous, garlic-laden, hot and smelling with all the herb-subtlety of a thousand years of Polish sausage culture." The effect, he recalls, was to "bring tears to the eyes, a clutch at the throat and clarity to the mind." Astrophysicists, construction workers, art historians, and secretaries lined up for the experience. One day Sittler saw a friend. "I was astonished. Dr. Platz, what are you doing here? You are a pathologist; you know very well you ought not to eat one of those violent things! I am only a theologian and I don't know any better. But you are a doctor - and you have professionally examined the catastrophic effect upon the stomach of these explosive, eroding sausages." Charles Platz fixed me with a cool gaze. "Yes" he said, "You are quite right. But these things are very good, aren't they?" (Grace Notes and Other Fragments, p. 74-75)

Christian faith is winsome when it can be witnessed in lives made more human because of it; lives that are more alive, more intense, more intentional. That, I have a growing conviction, was part of Jesus' personal mystique and magnetism. He was alive and lively. He was not grim and boring like the traditional teachers of religion. His teaching was about life lived fully. He generated excitement wherever he went,

controversy, heated discussions. People got "steamed-up" about what he was saying. It was interesting to be around him. And one time he said to his followers, "You are the salt of the earth."

As far as I know, "Salt of the earth" was not a common idiom. It has become one. It means "good, solid, stable, hard-working, dependable." But I don't think the disciples had heard it before and I don't think that is what Jesus meant when he used it.

The setting is the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes precede this saying. "Blessed" - or more accurately, "happy" - are the poor, the meek, the hungry, the peacemakers, the persecuted." I've always thought that the only honest initial reaction to the Beatitudes had to have been, "You've got to be kidding." Poor people aren't happy. That's the most cynical of stereotypes. There's nothing blessed about being hungry. The meek lose a lot. As a friend said to me once in the bleachers after we had watched our team lose by one point in over-time, "People who learn to lose graciously, usually do." Nice guys finish last, then and now. You have to imagine the disciples hearing those statements for the first time. I imagine them thinking things like this - "He doesn't mean that literally. He doesn't mean that we are really supposed to live like that...or perhaps, if he does, he obviously means for us to remove ourselves from society, to retire to a desert monastery where we can be poor, meek and hungry to our hearts' content." There were, in fact, desert communities of ascetic religious zealots living in monasteries. I think that when the disciples heard the Beatitudes they would have concluded automatically that he meant for them to withdraw from the world. And so he was saying something very important when he added to the Beatitudes..."Oh, and by the way - you are the salt of the earth."

They knew what he meant. It may have been a new metaphor but it was vivid and recognizable. Salt was valuable. It was necessary as a preservative and purifier. It was used liturgically in Temple sacrifices. It was an attractive trade commodity. But the interesting and in a sense most valuable quality of salt - what made it a luxury - was its ability to season food. Salt makes bland food tasty. The internists may cringe because we eat far too much of it. But it enhances and draws out flavor. It adds vitality.

The first and basic meaning of this remarkable metaphor is that Christianity must be applied to the world or it is worthless. Following Jesus is connected to the rest of life or it is not authentic. That is not a moot point, by the way. In fact, there is no more important issue, nor controversial either, than the relationship of faith to life.

Somewhere along the line many of us learned that religious faith removes us from life, is unconnected with life, may be believed, observed and celebrated in a vacuum, a Sunday morning vacuum with no contact with Monday morning ambiguity. The ancient monastic idea still has its appeal. When we say "religion and politics don't mix," very often what we mean is that religion and life don't mix. The people who built and operated Auschwitz frequently said "religion and politics don't mix."

Our tradition - the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, part of what is known as "Mainline Religion" has tried to shape society as well as be shaped by it. It has never retreated from it. Theologically, Mainline Religion is the heir of the Puritan movement. We may not agree with the Puritan's conclusion about public morality but it never occurred to them not to try to express their sense of the good in the world, which is to say the arena of politics and economics and social policy. We have never been universally popular. In trying to shape the world around us we have been salty - which sometimes means controversial, irritating. That way of being religious - our way - is not popular at the moment. Mainline Religion is in a period of decline. If the Religion Section page of Time Magazine is a barometer of where our culture is religiously, one thing is clear and it is that we are not in the mainstream. The mainstream thinks God is a celestial blackmailer whose capricious will may, on occasion, be pressed into service to raise a few million dollars to pay an evangelists' bills. The culture prefers the bizarre, the marginal, and - always - the withdrawn, the safe, the ultimately bland.

May I suggest that the text this morning has particular meaning for those of us who hear it and who are members of this much-worried-about Presbyterian/Reformed tradition. May I suggest that we hear it addressed to us. "You are the salt of the earth." Our values are important. The values of Mainline Religion and the Reformed/Presbyterian traditions have been like seasoning in this culture that has developed over the centuries. Some of those values are:

pluralism - diversity - inclusiveness
tolerance - equal justice
free inquiry
freedom of expression
freedom of choice
compassion

Those values are under assault. Powerful forces would restrict freedom of choice, freedom of expression, what you can read and see and would make Christianity the normative religion of the nation in spite of the founders careful convictions and choices of individual citizens.

A lot of people are concerned about what will become of us in this environment. Someone has calculated that at the current rate of decline, the last Presbyterian will die sometime in the middle of the next century. I doubt that. But more to the point, we have a wonderful tradition of being salt of the earth, salt of this particular earth. My reading of the word this morning is that we ought to get on with it, do what we are called to do, be what we are called to be and trust God with our future as an institution.

We are salt of the earth, together, as part of our particular tradition and as part of this congregation. We are also salt of the earth as individuals. Salt acts on its environment. Salt changes what it touches. Salt flavors, preserves, purifies, and enlivens. It doesn't take much salt to make a big difference.

Notice, please, that Jesus' statement is not in the imperative mood. He didn't order them - or plead with them to become salt. He used the declarative "You are ... you are already the seasoning of the world..."

As I think about the ones who heard that first, I begin to hear it differently. They were a modest bunch, uneducated, illiterate, poor, not influential...I don't think they would have considered themselves to be salt of the earth - or anything remotely like it.

So it was a compliment, a graceful statement, in our jargon...positive reinforcement. "You are salt." And, of course, that is what they became.

So I hear it differently...and I invite you to hear it in its declarative mood. You are already, here and now, salt of the earth.

You are doing difficult jobs with grace and kindness.

You are making hard decisions with justice and fairness.

You are now seasoning your office, courtroom, kitchen, operating room, laboratory, bedroom, with love, integrity. You are salt - and it doesn't take much.

Jesus wanted people to follow him in the context of their own lives: not just by walking with him in Galilee, not just in secret rituals and not by withdrawing into isolated religious communities. Jesus wanted Christian fisherman, tax collectors, homemakers, traders and soldiers. He intended, I believe, that this dispersal of his people in and through the common life would not only change the common life, as salt does, but that it would do so by bringing a liveliness, a zest for life, a profound love for life to its sense of purpose.

He calls us salt of the earth. God loves the earth. God doesn't call people away from the world in order to be faithful. "The world is God's first love, God's first fiancee" is the way one New Testament scholar puts it. (Reudi-Weber, op. cit., p. 10)

To be faithful is to turn to the world in love, to live life fully, deeply, intentionally and gratefully. It is to understand that at the heart of it all, to be a Christian is to be fully human.

In a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer wrote: "The disciples must not think only of heaven: they have an earthly task as well." Part of our fascination with Dietrich Bonhoeffer is that in a very real way he made a decision to be in the world. As World War II was looming, he was in this country, at Union Seminary, New York City, teaching. Friends begged him to stay, teach, and return to Germany after the war. He decided instead to return - and after he returned cast his lot with the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler.

His prison letters are precious. In one he wrote, "I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity as never before...I don't mean the shallow this-worldliness of the comfortable. It's something much more profound than that; something in which the knowledge of death and

resurrection is ever present. I am still discovering that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe. I am glad I have been able to learn it, and know I could only have done so along the road I have traveled. Goodbye. Take care of yourself and don't lose hope...We shall all meet again soon." (Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 225, 227)

God's purpose is that faithful people are to become seasoning for the whole world. The promise is fullness of life. Jesus said to his disciples, his friends, to you and me, here in this time and place - "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.".

Amen.

God our creator, our savior and our sustainer; we pray for strength to love and live. Sometimes, O Lord, we become tired of the world. Sometimes we are weary of trying to love it and would rather escape. God, our sustainer, give us heart and courage to love and to season our world with your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.